SWORD ART ONLINE WAS A NEXT-GEN VIRTUAL REALITY MMORPG.
TWO YEARS AGO, AKIHIKO KAYABA TRAPPED TEN THOUSAND PLAYERS WITHIN THAT VIRTUAL WORLD.
ESCAPE WAS IMPOSSIBLE UNTIL THE GAME WAS BEATEN.
GAME OVER MEANT ACTUAL DEATH IN REAL LIFE.
IN THAT WORLD, MY NAME WAS KIRITO.
AND I WAS A SOLO ADVEN-TURER...
...WHO SOUGHT THE TOP FLOOR OF THE GAME WHERE THE FINAL BOSS WAITED.

I GOT BACK TO REALITY SAFE AND SOUND.
ON THE 75TH FLOOR OF THE FLOATING CASTLE AINCRAD...
...I REALIZED THAT OUR COMPANION, HEATH-CLIFF, WAS KAYABA, THE FINAL BOSS...
...DEFEATED HIM IN A DUEL, AND BEAT THE GAME.

stage.001

TWO MONTHS LATER, 2024
JANUARY
I'M ALL RIGHT.
YOU SHOULDN'T PUSH YOURSELF...
YOU SPENT AN ENTIRE TWO YEARS IN BED.
HYUN
HYUN (SWISH)
WH—
WHAT'S THAT, ONII-CHAN?
I'M JUST SHOWING YOU THE RESULTS OF MY DAILY REHAB AT THE GYM.

NO, THIS IS FINE.
YOUR FORM IS RIDICULOUS... AND IT'S DANGEROUS WITHOUT ANY ARMOR ON.
PITA (FREEZE)
ZA (ZSHH)
IT'S MY OWN STYLE!

HYUN
HYUN (SWOOSH)
KOTO (THUNK)
WHEN DID YOU PRACTICE THAT STYLE, ONII-CHAN?
I WASN'T EXPECTING THAT!
PISHI (SNATCH)
AH.
GASP
UH...
ONII-CHAN?
SU (SHH)
すっ
AH...
DID YOU WHACK YOUR-SELF SOME-WHERE ...?
N-NO...
JUST AN OLD HABIT FROM YEARS OF PRACTICE ...

IT IS FUN, THOUGH.
MAYBE I SHOULD PICK UP KENDO AGAIN...
KAAA (BLUSH)
BA (LEAP)
REALLY? REALLY!?
WILL YOU TEACH ME, SUGU?
OF—
OF COURSE I WILL! LET'S DO KENDO AGAIN!
BUT NOT UNTIL I BUILD UP SOME MUSCLE AGAIN.
IN THAT CASE...
UMM, ONII-CHAN...
...I WANTED TO SAY...

HMM?
NEVER MIND.
IT'S STILL A SECRET!
WHAT?
HEY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING TODAY?
UH, WELL...

I'M GOING...
...TO THE HOSPITAL...
...OF COURSE.
YOU'RE VISITING HER.

MY BROTHER IS KAZUTO KIRIGAYA.
BUT IT WOULD BE MORE ACCURATE TO SAY THAT I, SUGUHA KIRIGAYA, AM ACTUALLY HIS COUSIN.
HE'S MY AUNT'S SON. WE'RE NOT REAL SIBLINGS.
MY PARENTS ONLY TOLD ME THE TRUTH TWO YEARS AGO.
IT WAS A LITTLE WHILE AFTER HE HAD BEEN TAKEN PRISONER IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD CALLED SWORD ART ONLINE.
THE SAO INCIDENT LED TO TWO THOUSAND DEATHS WITHIN A MONTH.
THEY DECIDED TO TELL ME THE TRUTH WHILE THEY KNEW HE WAS STILL ALIVE.
IT WAS A VERY HARD DECISION ...

WHICH IS WHY...
...I WAS SO OVER-JOYED ...
...WHEN HE FINALLY WOKE UP.

...SOMEONE SPECIAL IN THAT OTHER WORLD.

BUT HE HAD ALREADY FOUND...

HE TOLD ME ABOUT IT A MONTH AGO.
THEY WERE TOGETHER UNTIL THE FINAL MOMENT...
...AND THEY PROMISED TO MAKE IT BACK TO THE REAL WORLD TOGETHER.
BUT THAT WISH DIDN'T COME TRUE.
SHE'S STILL SLEEPING TODAY...

WELL, ONII-CHAN ...
...I ALREADY KNOW THE BIG SECRET.
I'M NOT SURE WHAT'S REALLY CHANGED NOW THAT WE'RE COUSINS INSTEAD OF SIBLINGS.
BUT THERE'S ONE THING THAT'S CHANGED FOR SURE.
A TINY SECRET THAT KEEPS BEATING DEEP WITHIN MY CHEST.
THE POSSIBILITY THAT MAYBE...
...IT'S OKAY FOR ME TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOU...
...AFTER ALL...

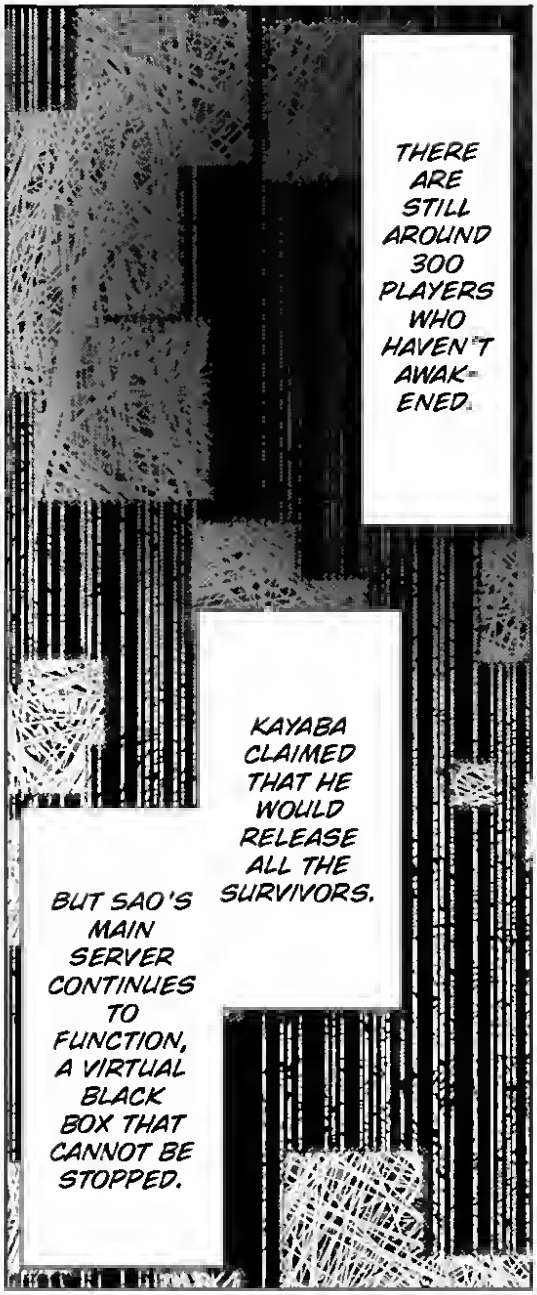
I GOT MY LIFE BACK.
I BEAT SAO.
BUT...
KATSUN (KTOK)
THERE'S ONE THING I LEFT BACK IN THAT VIRTUAL WORLD.
KATSUN

ASUNA THE FLASH NEVER RETURNED TO THE REAL WORLD.

MY PARTNER, MY BELOVED...

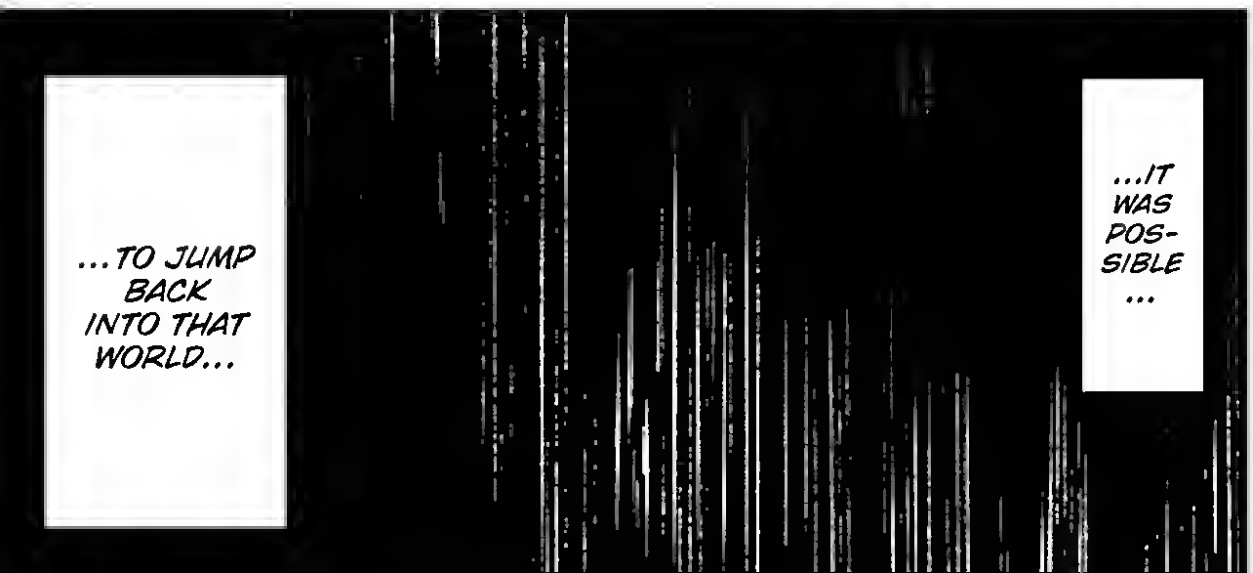
HER...

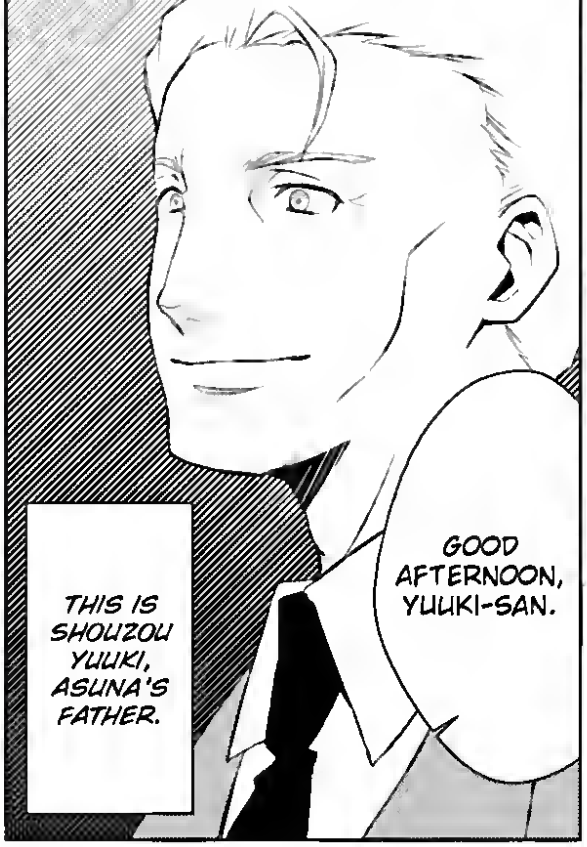
NAMEPLATE: ASUNA YUUKI


THERE ARE STILL AROUND 300 PLAYERS WHO HAVEN'T AWAKENED.
KAYABA CLAIMED THAT HE WOULD RELEASE ALL THE SURVIVORS.
BUT SAO'S MAIN SERVER CONTINUES TO FUNCTION, A VIRTUAL BLACK BOX THAT CANNOT BE STOPPED.

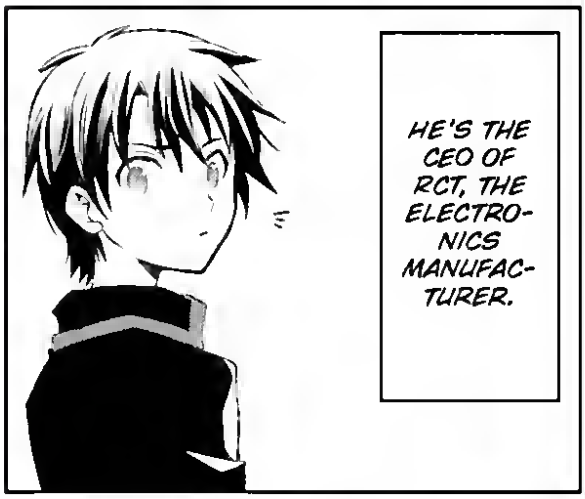
ASUNA...

THERE'S NO WAY FOR ME TO KNOW ...
... WHAT'S GOING ON IN THERE ANY-MORE.
I'M HERE AGAIN.
IF ONLY ...

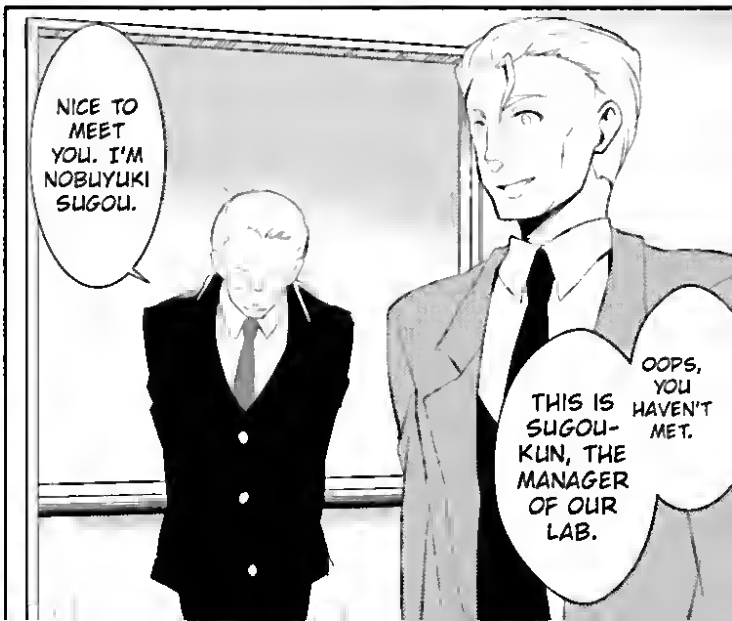

...IT WAS POS-SIBLE ...
...TO JUMP BACK INTO THAT WORLD...


GOOD AFTERNOON, YUUKI-SAN.
THIS IS SHOUZOU YUUKI, ASUNA'S FATHER.

AHH! YOU'RE ALREADY HERE, KIRIGAYA-KUN.
THANKS FOR VISITING SO OFTEN.


HE'S THE CEO OF RCT, THE ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURER.

SO YOU'RE *THE* HERO, KIRITO-KUN.

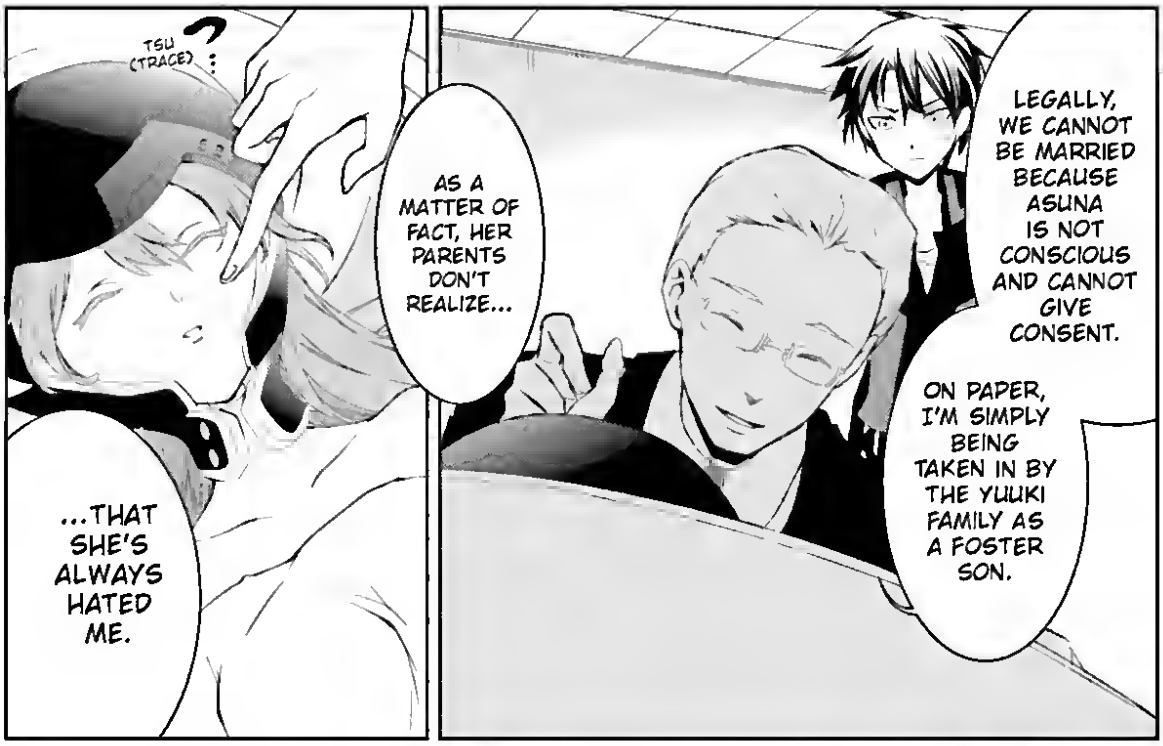

NICE TO MEET YOU. I'M NOBUYUKI SUGOU.
OOPS, YOU HAVEN'T MET.
THIS IS SUGOU-KUN, THE MANAGER OF OUR LAB.

WHAT IS HE TALKING ABOUT...?
I WAS HOPING WE COULD MAKE EVERYTHING OFFICIAL BY THE END OF NEXT MONTH.
I'D LIKE TO BE ABLE TO PUT HER IN THAT DRESS...
...WHILE SHE'S STILL SO BEAUTIFUL.
HE'S THE SON OF A GOOD FRIEND. OUR FAMILIES HAVE BEEN CLOSE FOR YEARS.
ABOUT THAT, SIR—
PIKU
OOPS, SORRY.
I KNOW, STUFF THAT HAPPENED IN THE SAO SERVERS IS ALL CONFIDENTIAL.
BUT IT WAS SUCH A DRAMATIC TALE, IT'S HARD NOT TO TALK ABOUT IT.
SIR, IT'S TIME ...
RIGHT, WE SHOULD BE GOING.
WELL, KIRIGAYA-KUN...
...I'LL SEE YOU AGAIN LATER.
IT MIGHT BE TIME TO MAKE A HARD DECISION...
...INDEED.

I HEAR YOU LIVED TOGETHER WITH ASUNA INSIDE THE GAME?
.....
.....?
...YES.
SU (SWH)
I SEE.
THAT MAKES THINGS... COMPLI-CATED... BETWEEN US, THEN.
YOU SEE. THE MATTER I MENTIONED A MOMENT AGO...

...CONCERNS MY MARRIAGE TO ASUNA.
DOKUN (BA-BUMP)

HEH HEH...
GOOD POINT.
YOU CAN'T...
...POS-SIBLY...
WHAT IS HE SAYING .....?


TSU (TRACE)
...THAT SHE'S ALWAYS HATED ME.
AS A MATTER OF FACT, HER PARENTS DON'T REALIZE...
LEGALLY, WE CANNOT BE MARRIED BECAUSE ASUNA IS NOT CONSCIOUS AND CANNOT GIVE CONSENT.
ON PAPER, I'M SIMPLY BEING TAKEN IN BY THE YUUKI FAMILY AS A FOSTER SON.

...THIS SITUATION SUITS MY ENDS SO WELL.
THAT'S WHY...
I ALWAYS KNEW THAT IF THE TOPIC OF MARRIAGE CAME UP, THERE WAS A HIGH PROBABILITY SHE'D REJECT IT.

STOP IT!!
PA! (SMACK)
GIRI (GRIT)
ARE YOU SAYING .....
...YOU'RE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF ASUNA'S COMA!?
NIKO (GRIN)
ADVAN-TAGE?
ACTUALLY, IT'S ENTIRELY MY LEGAL RIGHT.
KIRI-GAYA-KUN.

IN A WORD, IT'S ALL IN MY DEPARTMENT.
MEAN-ING...
ARE YOU AWARE OF WHAT HAPPENED TO ARGUS, THE DEVELOPERS OF SAO?
.....I'VE HEARD THEY WERE DISSOLVED.
YES.
IN ADDITION TO THE DEVELOPMENT COSTS, THE ASTRONOMICAL REPARATIONS FOR THE INCIDENT DROVE THEM BANKRUPT.
KATSU (TOKK)
WELL, MAINTENANCE OF THE SAO SERVER WAS CONSIGNED TO RCT'S FULL-DIVE ENGINEERING TEAM.
KATSU

AND DOESN'T THAT...
...ENTITLE ME TO JUST THE TINIEST LITTLE COMPEN-SATION?
...HER LIFE IS NOW...
...UNDER MY SUPERVISION AND CONTROL.

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT KIND OF PROMISES YOU TWO MADE WHILE YOU WERE INSIDE THE GAME...
...BUT I'D APPRECIATE IT IF YOU STOPPED VISITING THE HOSPITAL.
AND PLEASE KEEP YOUR DISTANCE FROM THE YUUKI FAMILY.
...AND USING THEM FOR HIS OWN NEFARIOUS PURPOSES!!
I DON'T BELIEVE THIS!!
—I WISH I HAD MY SWORDS ...
WE'LL HAVE THE CEREMONY HERE AT THE HOSPITAL NEXT MONTH.
TELL YOU WHAT; I'LL SHOOT YOU AN INVITATION.
...HER VERY LIFE...
HE'S TAKING ASUNA'S CONDITION...

GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR FINAL MEETING...

...HERO.

THE ROUGH, MERCILESS WHETSTONE OF REALITY...

...IS GRINDING DOWN THE BEAUTIFUL SHINING JEWEL OF MY MEMORY.

SUGOU HAS ALWAYS BEEN VERY CLOSE TO THE YUUKIS.
HE'S BASICALLY HER FIANCÉ.
SHOUZOU YUUKI TRUSTS HIM, AND HE'S IN AN IMPORTANT POSITION AT RCT.
AND WHO AM I?
JUST A GUY SHE MET INSIDE A VIRTUAL VIDEO GAME.
I BELIEVED THAT THE VIRTUAL WORLD...
...MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN THE REAL WORLD TO US.
BUT...
I'M HOPE-LESS ...
WH...
WHAT'S WRONG?
NOTHING.
BUT...
THE BATH IS OPEN, ONII-CHAN—

I SWORE TO MYSELF...
...THAT I WOULDN'T COMPLAIN IN FRONT OF YOU...
DID SOMETHING HAPPEN... WITH ASUNA-SAN?
ASUNA...
...IS GOING... FAR AWAY.
FAR BEYOND...
...MY GRASP...
C'MON.
HANG IN THERE.

...ON THE ONE YOU TRULY LOVE.....
DON'T JUST GIVE UP...

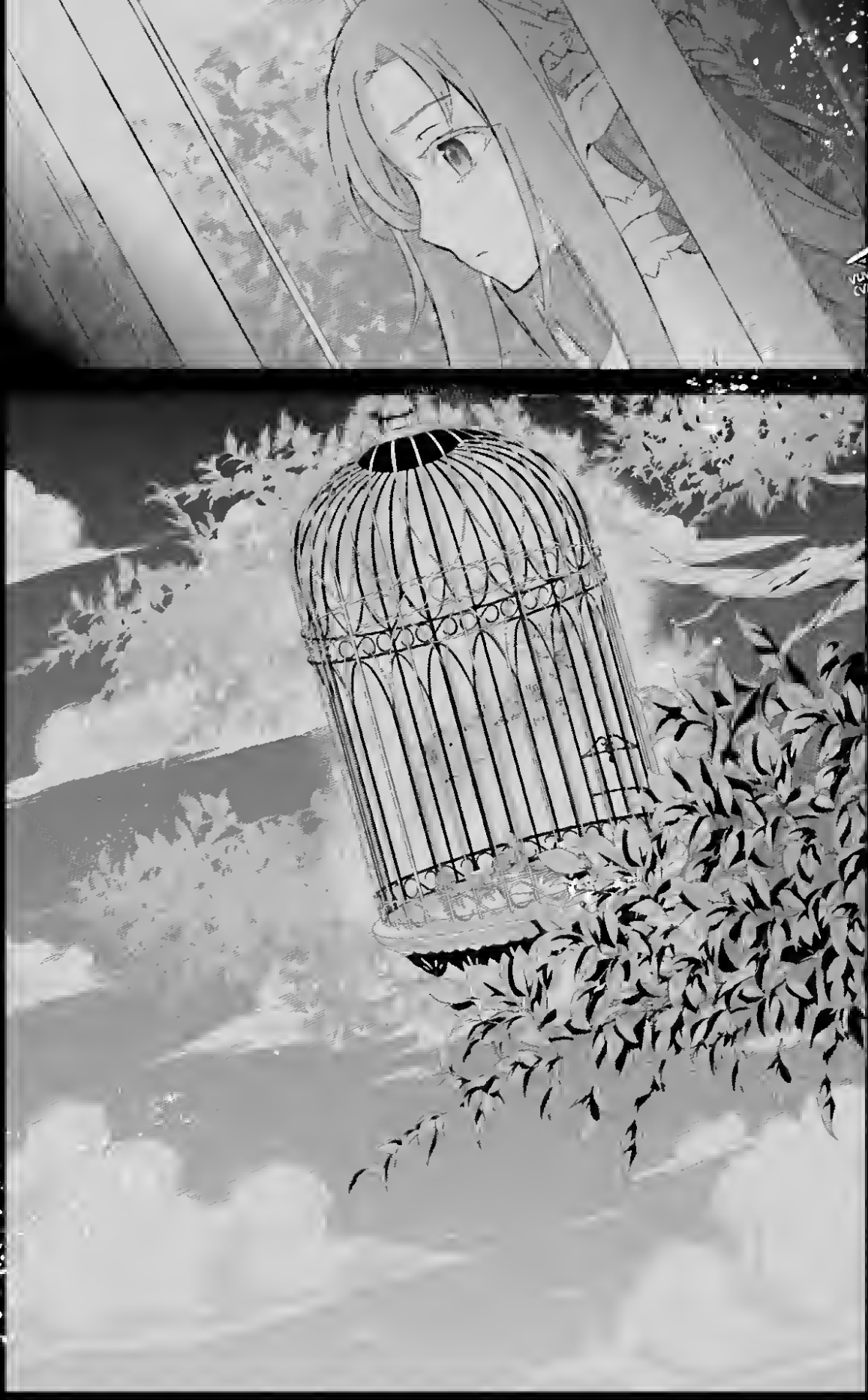
UM...
HANG ON...
CHICHICHI (CHIRP)

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?
MUNI (PINCH)
GET UP, SUGU, IT'S MORNING.
MMM.
YAWN...
AH.
GOOD MORNING, ONII-CHA.....

!!
KAAA (BLUSH)
AH—!
UM—!!
ATA FUTA (FLUSTER)
I DIDN'T —!

WAAAAAH!
DA (DASH)
BATAN (SLAM)
SHEESH ...

Unread
New Message
FILE
POON (DING)
VUN (VMM)
NEW E-MAIL?
Title
LOOK at THIS
Sender
Agil
(From mail) Answer our survey and get more space!
Notice of new auction
For your eyes only!
Please respond now
PI (BEEP)
FILE
HE HELPED ME OUT A BUNCH IN SAO...
AGIL...
WHAT DOES HE WANT?



ASUNA...?

"AMU-SPHERE"?
IT'S A SUCCESSOR TO THE NERVEGEAR THAT CAME OUT WHILE WE WERE OVER THERE.
SO THIS IS ANOTHER VRMMO, THEN?

WHAT DID THAT MEAN?
FIRST, LOOK AT THIS.
SHU SHU

IT'S ACTUALLY MORE LIKE "ALV-HEYM."
MEANS "LAND OF THE FAIRIES," APPARENTLY.
BUT CONTRARY TO THE NAME, THE GAME ITSELF IS PRETTY HARDCORE.
WHAT MAKES IT HARD-CORE?

ALFHEIM O
ALF... HEIM... ONLINE.

I SEE.
AND THE BATTLE DEPENDS ON THE PLAYER'S ACTUAL ATHLETIC ABILITY.
IT'S LIKE SAO WITH MAGIC AND NO SWORD SKILLS.
HOW IS PK-ING ENCOUR-AGED?

TOTALLY SKILL-BASED.
PLAYER SKILL IS REWARDED, PK-ING IS ENCOURAGED.
YOU DON'T HAVE A "LEVEL"— YOU CAN ONLY POWER UP SKILLS THROUGH USE. YOUR HP BARELY INCREASES THROUGH THE GAME.

WHEN YOU CREATE YOUR CHARACTER, YOU CHOOSE FROM A NUMBER OF FAIRY SPECIES, AND YOU'RE ALLOWED TO PK THE OTHER KINDS.
WOW, THAT DOES SOUND HARD-CORE.
BUT A GAME LIKE THAT WON'T SELL BIG, EVEN WITH GREAT PRODUCTION VALUES.
NOT IF IT'S DESIGNED FOR SUCH A NICHE MARKET.
THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT, BUT...
IT'S BEEN SELLING LIKE GANG-BUSTERS.
BECAUSE YOU CAN "FLY" IN THE GAME.
EVERY-ONE'S A FAIRY, SO THEY HAVE WINGS.
IT'S GOT SOME KIND OF IN-GAME FLIGHT ENGINE...
...AND ONCE YOU GET USED TO IT, YOU CAN FLY AROUND FREELY WITHOUT A CONTROLLER.
THAT SOUNDS COOL.

...WHAT DO YOU THINK IT WAS?
WHAT WAS THAT PICTURE?
SOWA (FIDGET)
...LET'S GET BACK TO THE TOPIC AT HAND.
BUT ANY-WAY...
SHE LOOKED ...
...LIKE ASUNA.

IN THERE.
JUST TELL ME, WHERE WAS IT TAKEN?
IT'S A SCREENSHOT FROM THE GAME, SO I CAN'T BLOW IT UP ANY LARGER, UNFORTUN-ATELY.
SO YOU AGREE.
INSIDE ALFHEIM ONLINE.
ALFHEIM ON
—THEY CALL IT THE WORLD TREE.
THE PLAYER'S GOAL IS TO REACH THE LAND ATOP THE TREE BEFORE THE OTHER RACES CAN GET THERE.

WHY DON'T THEY JUST FLY?
THERE'S A LIMIT ON YOUR FLIGHT TIME.
PORO (PLOP)
YOU CAN'T FLY FOREVER ...
IN FACT, YOU CAN'T EVEN REACH THE LOWEST BRANCH OF THE TREE THAT WAY.
BUT THERE'S ALWAYS SOME IDIOT WHO WANTS TO TRY. I HEARD ABOUT A GROUP OF FIVE...
HEAVE!
HOOO!
HEAVE, HOOO!
...WHO STOOD ON EACH OTHERS' SHOULDERS, LIGHTEST TO HEAVIEST, AND TRIED TO REACH THE BRANCHES LIKE A ROCKET WITH FUEL TANKS.
LIGHTWEIGHT TUNIC INSTEAD OF ARMOR
I SEE... THAT'S PRETTY SMART, FOR BEING SO STUPID.
WELL, THEIR PLAN WAS GOOD, AND THEY GOT CLOSE.
THEY DIDN'T QUITE REACH THE LOWEST BRANCH ...
...BUT THEY TOOK SOME SCREENS AS PROOF OF THEIR ALTITUDE...
...AND ONE OF THE SHOTS SHOWED SOMETHING STRANGE.

AN ENORMOUS BIRDCAGE...
...HANGING FROM ONE OF THE BRANCHES.
A BIRD-CAGE .....
RCT—!!
RCTprogress.co.jp

WHAT'S WITH THE GLARE, MAN?
HEY, AGIL.
NO-THIN'.
WELL, WE'D KNOW FOR SURE IF I DID.
ZUI (LOOM)
AND YOU BET YOUR ASS I'D HAVE CALLED THE POLICE INSTEAD OF YOU.
ZAKU (CHUNK)
GOT ANY OTHER PICTURES?
ANYTHING THAT MIGHT SHOW OTHERS LIKE ASUNA, WHO NEVER RETURNED FROM SAO...
...HELD CAPTIVE WITHIN ALO...
YEAH...
I'M SURE YOU WOULD HAVE...

SUGOU HIMSELF CLAIMED THAT HE WAS MANAGING THE SAO SERVER.
A GIRL RESEMBLING ASUNA WAS SEEN WITHIN A NEW VRMMO...
...BEING MANAGED BY RCT.
IT'S ALL A LITTLE TOO CONVENIENT FOR HIS PURPOSES...
CAN IT REALLY JUST BE A COINCIDENCE?

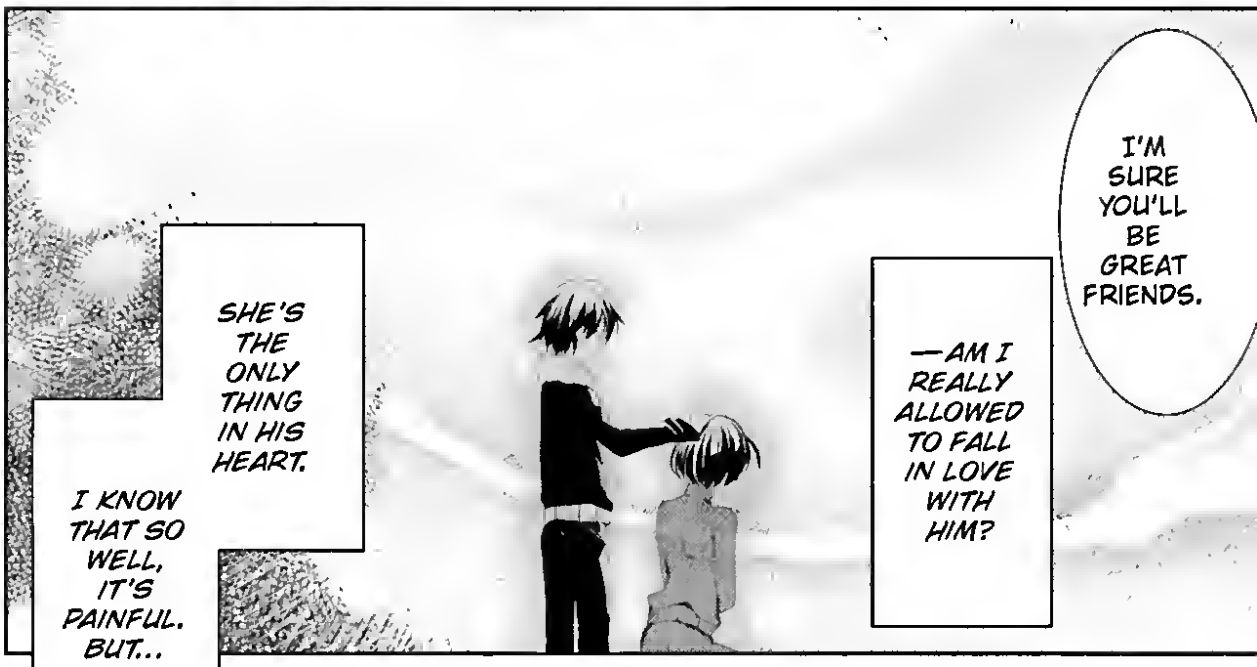
YOU GOING?
YEAH.
BE MY GUEST.
GATA (THUMP)
AGIL...
CAN I HAVE THIS GAME?
DON'T WORRY, AMUSPHERE GAMES WILL RUN ON A NERVE-GEAR.
THAT SAVES ME SOME MONEY.
NIKA (SMIRK)
I'LL PUT THAT TIP ON YOUR TAB...
I NEED TO SEE IT FOR MYSELF.
GUESS I'M IN THE MARKET FOR A NEW GAME CONSOLE.

OTHER-WISE OUR FIGHT ISN'T OVER.
—JUST MAKE SURE YOU RESCUE ASUNA.
YEAH.
WE NEED TO HAVE AN OFFLINE MEET-UP HERE SOMEDAY.

ぐすん
GUSUN (SNIFFLE)
ぼふん
BOFUN (FWUMP)
かあああ
KAAA (BLUSH)
ぼすぼす
BOSU (BOFF)
BOSU
I'M SO STUPID, STUPID, STUPID!

ARGH...
WHAT THE HECK AM I DOING...?
NOM.
PAKU (CHOMP)
DOKI (BA-THUMP)
SUGU!
KATA (THUNK)
E-EH...
(SWITCH)
!!
RRGH!
MMGULP!
TON (PAT)
TON
B-WAH!
MAN, YOU'RE SO CLUMSY.
I...
I THOUGHT I WAS GONNA CHOKE TO DEATH...
WHEEZE
WHEEZE
YOU DON'T HAVE TO WOLF IT DOWN ALL AT ONCE.
SUGU.
THANKS FOR CHEERING ME UP YESTERDAY. IT REALLY HELPED.

I'M NOT GOING TO GIVE UP.
I'LL KEEP GOING UNTIL I'VE RESCUED ASUNA.
GOOD. KEEP AT IT.
I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO MEET HER.
—AND AM I ALLOWED TO KEEP AT IT TOO?


I'M SURE YOU'LL BE GREAT FRIENDS.
—AM I REALLY ALLOWED TO FALL IN LOVE WITH HIM?
SHE'S THE ONLY THING IN HIS HEART.
I KNOW THAT SO WELL, IT'S PAINFUL. BUT...

THAT WAS WHEN THIS FEELING WELLED UP WITHIN ME.
WHEN HE WOKE UP TWO MONTHS AGO, THERE WERE TEARS IN HIS EYES AS HE SMILED...
...REACHED OUT, AND CALLED ME "SUGU."
I CAN'T FORCE MY-SELF TO SWAL-LOW THIS EMO-TION.
I WANT TO TALK MORE WITH YOU.
I WANT TO BE WITH YOU ALWAYS.
KACHI (TICK)
KACHI
AH!
SHU (SWISH)
BUT... ALL I CAN DO NOW IS WATCH FROM THE SIDE...

I FORGOT MY PROMISE!
OH CRAP!
KACHA (KCHAK)
POW
WAN
BLK
THE SHACKLES THAT IMPRISONED ME FOR TWO WHOLE YEARS.
A REVOLUTIONARY NEW DEVICE THAT CONNECTS DIRECTLY TO THE WEARER'S BRAIN, ALLOWING HIM TO FULLY DIVE INTO A VIRTUAL SPACE.
THE NERVEGEAR.

...A LOYAL FRIEND IN BATTLE THAT NEVER ONCE FAILED TO WORK PROPERLY DURING THAT TIME.
BUT IT'S ALSO...

PLEASE...

LEND ME YOUR STRENGTH...
...JUST ONE MORE TIME!

LINK START!

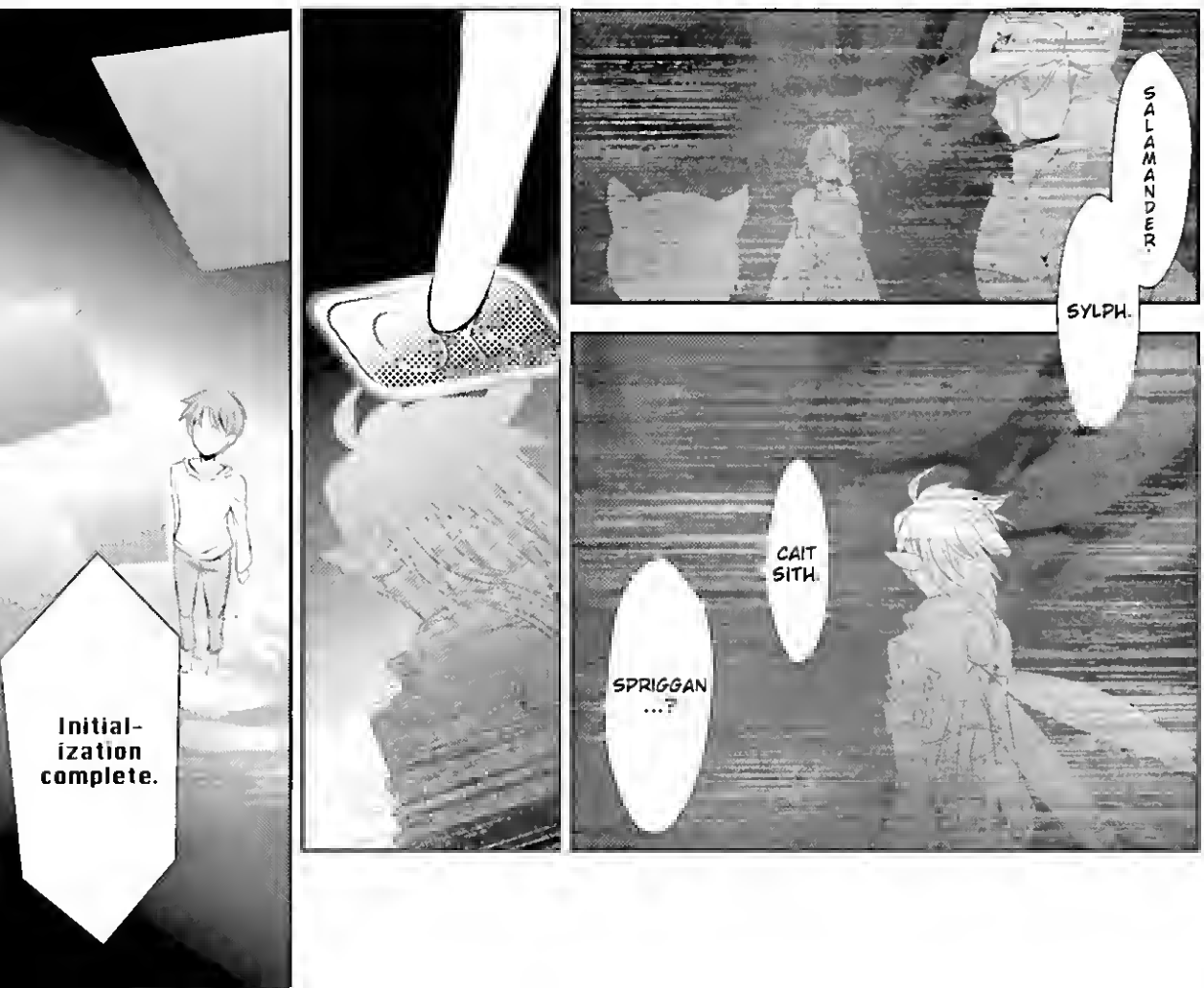
FULL DIVE!!

Creating account information. Enter your new ID and password.
Please enter your character name.
—Welcome...
...to ALfheim Online.

VERY LITTLE INFORMATION FROM THE WORLD OF SAO WENT PUBLIC— AND NONE OF OUR CHARACTER NAMES.

SUGUHA AND MY PARENTS WON'T KNOW IT.

PAA (GLOW)
Creating character.
VUVUN (VMM)
Choose your race...
...from these nine options.
PI (BEEP)
I'M NERVOUS NOBUYUKI SUGOU MIGHT HAVE LEARNED IT..
...BUT IT'S NOT THAT MEMORABLE OF A NAME.
I THINK I'LL BE FINE.


Initialization complete.
SALAMANDER.
SYLPH.
CAIT SITH.
SPRIGGAN ...?

ZAZA
And now, best of lu—
ZAZ (ZZSSH)
GUNYAA (GLORRP)
WH...
WHAT THE —?!
GAKUN (YANK)

WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON HERE!?
GGHK GWAOOOH
WHA —!

IT'S...
IT'S NOTH-ING.

GET READY; WE'RE GOING TO FLY AS SOON AS OUR WINGS ARE RECHARGED.
B-BUT I'M...
...STILL DIZZY...
ARE YOU STILL FEELING SICK?

OH, THIS IS JUST SAD...
WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GET USED TO IT, RECON?

LEAFA-CHAN.
WHAT'S WRONG?

OUR NEXT FLIGHT...
...IS TAKING US OUT OF THE FOREST.

WH-WHERE...
...AM I?

ZAZAZA (FWSHH)
DOSA (THMP)
FMGH!

I THOUGHT IT SAID OUR STARTING POINT WAS OUR CHOSEN RACE'S HOMETOWN.
WELL, THIS SURE AIN'T A TOWN...
HANG IN THERE, ASUNA ...
I'M COM-ING FOR YOU NOW.